

Black Women's Bodies in American Culture and Performance
Senior Distinction Thesis by Kylee C. Smith

My senior thesis project explores Black women's bodies in American culture and performance. It arose out of a desire to give myself space to deal fully with my own experiences as a Black woman dancer and to examine their intersection with Black dance scholarship theories. I wanted to make a dance as a reaction and response to my findings, which became a solo piece performed by myself inside of a larger group work performed by five other dancers entitled *my body is a church. Or, where the dance becomes sacred*. For clarity, I have divided this paper into sections about specific themes that will help the reader understand the background from which I came to this project, how it developed, my methods, and my outcomes.

To Be Black and Woman

Over the course of my time at Ohio State I have come into a clearer understanding of two things about myself: my Blackness and my womanness. For me, these are inextricably intertwined with one another. As Julia S. Jordan-Zachery writes, my identity is like a “‘marble cake,’ and therefore cannot not be separated or unlocked” (Jordan-Zachery 261). Two aspects of my identity have been central to my experiences as a dancer. Growing up, I used to wonder if the genetic predispositions of my body were the reason why I could not get my extensions to be as high as some of my other classmates. I wondered if I was not able to hold certain roles in our performances because what would it look like if a Black girl was playing Peter in *Peter and the Wolf*? I thought that I could never be a ballerina because my body was not “right” for the field. I had all these thoughts about myself and how I could not be a “dancer” and all of them had to do with the fact that I am not white.

So much of blackness is defined in terms of whiteness as a result of imperialism, colonialism, and slavery. In the United States and across the Diaspora, this has manifested in the

preference of Eurocentric aesthetics over Africanist aesthetics. Within the US in particular, this means that while Black people and culture have been at the heart of American popular culture since the first Africans were ever brought here, that influence has been intentionally “invisibilized,” to borrow a word from Brenda Dixon Gottschild (*Digging the Africanist Presence 2*). As the dance field is a facet of the larger American culture, it is not exempt from any of its ills. Blackness is erased and invalidated here in the same way as it is everywhere else.

Before I came to Ohio State, I had spent so much time unsure of whether I could be a dancer because I had never seen anybody that looked like me do what I wanted to do. Alvin Ailey’s companies and Misty Copeland existed, but they were not enough. That was not the Black culture that I identified with the most. My Blackness was big-hipped Aunties that squeezed my head between their thighs as they braided my hair. My Blackness was loud and evangelical. Mine was cars lining the side of the street for family reunions at my grandma’s house. Mine was a kitchen full of women cooking and talking and screaming with laughter. It was running around in dirt yards with my cousins. For a long time, I thought that I would have to give all that up in order to be a good dancer.

Visual Activism

“My daughters walk, they map out space. They take up space.” – Ochun. (from “Hip Work: Undoing the Tragic Mulata” by Melissa Blanco Borelli)

I have come to firmly believe that Black bodies taking up space is political. The presence of Black dancing bodies on stage is political. When I was first exposed to Black dance scholarship, it was in Dr. Hannah Kosstrin’s History, Theory, and Literature of dance course. It was there that I learned about women like Pearl Primus and Katherine Dunham. I found their work to be inspiring because they were Black people openly barred from the “high art”

professional dance stage at that time, but these women were making dances with social commentary. They recognized their responsibility in the community to continue to engage with work that was contemporary to their times. They made dances that did not exist in a vacuum. They used the stage to carve out space for Blackness and to call out whiteness. Hershini Bhana Young talks about this in her essay “Twenty First Century Post Humans: The Rise of the See-J” in regard to Mamie Till’s decision to have an open casket viewing for her son, Emmitt:

Yet the shudder and moan, the gaze and the aversion of the gaze elicited by Emmitt Till’s mutilated body, activate another politics of looking that moves away from staring to what [Rosemarie] Garland-Thomson terms visual activism: “By putting themselves in the public eye, saying ‘look at me’ instead of ‘don’t stare,’ people...practice what might be called visual activism...as a three step process: look, think, act.” Can you be black and look at this? Can you be black and *not* look at this? (Young 52).

The idea of visual activism was very important to this project. In my dance, I sought to turn an oppositional gaze on the audience and the dance field as well. *Who are you to say that I cannot be a Black woman and a dancer? That I cannot live fully in my body and be a dancer as well?* I wanted to call into question the lack of visible diversity with which audiences are normally presented, both at Ohio State and beyond. With that in mind, I recognize that not all of my dancers are Black, and that my thesis is deeply rooted in my own experience as a Black woman. I intentionally chose a cast of women from different heritages and ethnic identities, and I hope that this caused the audience to reflect upon the lack of visible diversity with which they had been presented previously.

Another aspect of my hopes for this work was to push back against the traditional gaze of the audience. I wanted to make the shift from consuming to witnessing. I discovered this

possibility in reading Ann Cooper Albright's *Choreographing Difference*. I was struck by this particular passage in the introduction:

To witness something implies a responsiveness, the response/ability of the viewer toward the performer. It is radically different from what we might call the “consuming” gaze that says “here, you entertain me, I bought a ticket, and I’m going to sit back and watch.” This traditional gaze doesn’t want to get involved, doesn’t want to give anything back. In contrast, what I call witnessing is much more interactive, a kind of perceiving (with one’s whole body) that is committed to a process of mutual dialogue. There precedents for this responsive watching in...African American notions of bearing witness, the responsive dynamic of many evangelistic religions...” (Albright xxii).

I think that whether or not I was able to make this shift in audience engagement, I was able to achieve this with my dancers. In the making of the choreography, it became clear that having them on stage the entire time was important. I especially wanted to have their presence surrounding me during my solo. The Yoruba people have a word *ashé* which translates to the bearing witness that Albright speaks of above. I wanted to make sure that the energetic circle within my cast was a constant one that carried us all along its current.

Choreographing Difference

One of the first pieces of Black dance scholarship that left a visceral impression on me was Brenda Dixon Gottschild's *The Black Dancing Body*. It was exciting to find a book that literally mapped the parts of my body that I had always felt most problematic in my quest for being a dancer. In the introduction of her text, she talks about why she decided to make a “geography” saying, “Geography as a metaphor for the sites, states, routes, and milestones of the

black dancing body. The body as both body politic and individual signature” (*The Black Dancing Body* 8).

This geography of sites is where I began making my dance. I started my solo rehearsals with a fifteen minute, non-stop improvisation of a single body part. I started with my feet, and worked my way up from there. Once I had explored my whole body, I started a full body exploration. This is part of the reason why I am so grateful to have worked with a dramaturg, Cole Henry Jones. The non-stop improvisations were an idea of his from an intensive he had attended the summer before we began this process. I recorded most of these improvisation sessions, and then afterwards, journaled about my experience: how it felt while I was in it, what I was thinking about, what movement kept reoccurring. After this, Cole would give me his notes, and we would begin exploring further some of the things we both noticed. In this way, I began to develop set choreography.

I started my group rehearsals in the same way as I did my solo rehearsal process. We started every rehearsal with a fifteen minute, non-stop improvisation of specific body parts and then built out from there. It was very important for me to engage my dancers in writing as well, especially since I had intentions of creating a voice score to accompany the piece. I knew that in order for this piece to be successful, I had to find ways for my dancers to create their own frame of reference through which to view the work. Improvisation and writing were key to that endeavor. Those were the spaces where my dancers’ experiences and perspectives were most important; it was where they build their own lens to approach my work.

I also knew that I needed to create a safe rehearsal space. I knew that some of the material I was bringing with me into my process was heavy and could maybe make some of them uncomfortable. I made sure to check in regularly, but a couple of times throughout the

process, we played a game that I learned in Bebe Miller's technique class last semester called "Going to the Wall." We would stand in a cluster, and then one person would make an "I am" identity statement. Those who agreed or held the same identity or belief would remain in the cluster. Those who did not would walk away. I wish we had been able to spend more time with this, and been able to go deeper than we did, but I think it was an effective way of building trust and community in the beginning.

Further, I believe that we are all the sum of our lived experiences and our ancestral experiences as well. I remember specifically talking to my dancers about this as we began to craft what would eventually become one of the opening parts of the piece when they are standing in a line upstage left and moving through an alternating cycle of body part exploration. At this point, I was beginning to think about this dance in regards to its lineage. I recognized the influence of all of my ancestors who came before me on my present day existence, and I wanted to honor that in some small way in this work.

Black Spirit/Circles

Along the way I began to feel a very ancestral connection to my work. In one of my improvisation sessions during my solo rehearsals, I felt, at the end, as if I had been to church. I was not playing any sort of religious music; in fact, I have zero memory of what the experience sounded like, just what it felt like in my body and spirit. In my journal of that day I wrote, *"I FEEL GOOD. Content. Well in my soul. I feel like I went to church... I've been in church. Secular. Sacred. Spiritual. – BODY. There really is no division unless I make one."* That mid-November rehearsal was a turning point for my piece. Not only had I found what would be the title of my piece, but I also found something that I had not been looking for at all.

The sacred-secular dichotomy is something that I have been pondering for quite some time. In his chapter “Reading ‘Spirit’ and the Dancing Body in the Choreography of Ronald K. Brown and Reggie Wilson.” in *Black Performance Theory*, Carl Paris writes, “I want to claim, for the Africanist concert dance body, a space for what I might call the ‘imminent potentiality’ of spirit, the imaginable interplay of artistic intention and enlivened spiritual expression...I claim a space for the Africanist concert dancer to strive for the transformational power of the religious and culturally based spirit; and also for the spectator to experience it” (Paris 102). In retrospect, I believe that this is a central element to my choreographic intent. I wanted to explore ways to raise the energetic and spiritual level of the choreography which is ultimately what led to the circles and running in my dance. I needed to push my dancers through repetition and exhaustion. The circular running established an energetic current that I wanted my dancers to be able to dip into when they were tired; I wanted them to be carried with it, and hopefully, for the audience to be pulled along at the edges.

More importantly, I wanted to claim a space for me to have this sacred/spiritual transformation without fear of judgment. Because Eurocentric standards are so privileged, performance stages are supposed to hold to those rigid values. The stage is not supposed to be sacred. It is the secular space, and the church house is the sacred space. An Africanist perspective does not make these divisions. As Paris puts it, “...Thomas DeFrantz cautions, concert dance is a public space, a white modernist, European space of production and consumption. DeFrantz argues that reading ‘African cultural residues’ is complicated by the Western structures of art (including matters of audience response, technique, intent, and aesthetic value) and by the fact that “concert dance is never vernacular” (Paris 101). Paris goes further in explaining the different format of Africanist and Europeanist perspectives:

...in African diaspora religion, culture, and performance, spirit functions as embodied knowledge and contributes to and underlies meaning on deeply metaphysical, cognitive, and somatic planes (Daniel, *Dancing Wisdom*). Thus, undergirding performance, spirit stirs creative, psychic, and liberative energies, which can manifest themselves through communal lived experiences as well as through spontaneous, ecstatic, and kinetic “mounting” of the body and soul (e.g., possession), as in “getting the spirit,” or “getting happy” (Paris 100).

In the part of the piece where Brianna has her solo and the group continues running around her before the second part of my solo, I often told her to “catch the Holy Ghost,” or rather to “get in the spirit” to use Paris’ terms. The reason she pulled out from the group was because she was so energetically caught up in the transcendental power of the dance. She had to do it again; thus, the power of repetition as a means of ramping up energy is manifested. For her and other members of the group, I used terms that were specific to the Black church experience, because this was a language that was understood by both of us as Black women, but I also used language like “getting caught up and transformed by the energy” and “energetic current that manifests in spirit” for those of my dancers who were not as versed in the traditional Black worship experience.

In preparing for each performance, we gathered in a studio to do a ten minute, non-stop improvisation. We found that group improvisation was very important for getting us all to the spiritual/energetic space that this piece needed to be in before we even stepped foot on stage. I also asked them to find their own process, whether that was more improvisation, musical choices, journaling, or meditation, to do before we went on stage. I wanted to them to approach the intentions of the choreography from a space that most made sense to them.

Another key part of how I considered the sacred/secular dynamic was through music. After my initial spiritual experience, I began to find similarities to what I had found for myself in certain songs by an artist named Chance the Rapper. I first noted this in a performance of his song “All We Got” that I found on YouTube for BBC1. He stopped his song part of the way through, and offered the rest as a prayer for Kanye West. I found myself getting happy, getting church happy. The spirit of his work is in accordance with mine of course: he is a Christian like I am, but he does not make traditional “gospel” music. His music would not even be classified as “gospel rap.” Yet, his faith and his spirituality is very apparent to me. When I listen to Chance, it is clear that he is worshipping God through his art.

I wanted to do that too. Not in a specific, “this dance is about Jesus” way, but rather one that was more broadly transcendental. I bring my faith with me on to the stage, but whatever belief or mindset that my dancers hold was welcome and honored there too. I wanted to be intentional about giving them space to find that, and in our group improvisations before each performance, we used a song by Funkadelic called “Maggot Brain.” Not only was it the perfect length for our time frame, but we all agreed that it built the energetic current that I was looking for in the work. I found that getting to that place where I clearly felt the secular to sacred shift was hard in performance. I was expecting myself to be much more emotionally fragile than I was during the performance. I think that what was most important about that experience was to recognize that spirituality does not always have to manifest itself in the same way. The spirit of the small, quiet dance is just as valid as the full-bodied, wild possession.

Up Next

I learned so much in the making of the work. At the center of my methods was embodied research. I engaged with a great deal of Black dance theory scholarship and then used my own

body as a filter through which to distill them down to what I understand to be their critical essence. Not only can I engage in Black dance scholarship in a traditional, academic sense, but I have a physical understanding of it as well. Thinking about this now, I think that, for me, this is the only way for me to do this kind of work. It seems unwise to separate a danced culture from the dance. I understand Africanist elements so much more now that I have taken myself there and experienced them.

This piece is far from being done. I think really that this was the first step in what I want to do for the rest of my life. Beyond that, there is so much that I was not able to get to in this version. I wanted to create a text to accompany this work, and I ran out of time to do it. Truthfully, I think that this version of what this piece will become was full without the voice score, and my spirit did not release the words that I want to go with it in the future. I decided to leave it because I did not want to force it before the work and I, as the choreographer, were ready. Regardless, the eight minute piece of choreography that I produced was more than I could have ever imagined making three years ago. It feels incredible to have such a tangible outcome from a seed that was planted in my spirit over two years ago.

The space of reflection where I currently am has me regularly thinking back to an essay that I read for my Black Women Writers course this semester by Audre Lorde entitled “Poetry Is Not a Luxury.” She talks about how for Black women, [art] is not some flippant, fun thing that we do for attention, or to be cute. Creative expression is a means of survival. Lorde writes,

The quality of light by which we scrutinize our lives has direct bearing upon the product which we live, and upon the changes which we hope to bring about through those lives. It is within this light that we form those ideas by which we pursue our magic and make it realized. This is poetry as illumination, for it is through poetry that we give name to those

ideas which are, until the poem, nameless and formless-about to be birthed, but already felt. That distillation of experience from which true poetry springs births thought as dream births concept, as feeling births idea, as knowledge births (precedes) understanding. ("Poetry Is Not a Luxury")

my body is a church. Or, where the dance becomes sacred is the name of the idea that existed "nameless and formless" in me for a very long time. This project was how I further realized my magic. It is a direct extension of myself in so many ways. When I first found its title, I kept it close for a very long time because to speak it out loud to another person felt like a release of power. I wanted to be intentional about how and over whom I exerted that power. I let it nestle in my spirit for weeks before I shared it with my cast.

Black women sit at a particular intersection of oppression in the world. But our bodies have always been treasures. We are the reason our people survived the raping of our African heritage from our genes. Eurocentric ideals value a patriarchal society, but a strong matriarchy struggles and resists at the center of Black culture. I am proud to walk in the footsteps of my mother, and her mother, and her mother's mother...

My Mother
By: Kylee C. Smith

Amber.
Golden.
Cinnamon.
Cocoa.
Walnut.
Chestnut.
Espresso.
Ebony.
Truffle.
Earth.

Don't those words sound delectable, like luxury? See how *truffle* lingers delicately on the tip of your tongue for a moment after you've finished saying the word? Espresso is a highly sought after bean, curated and sold at high prices. And placed in the sunlight, an amber flicks light out into space; beauty is caught up in those rays. Cinnamon reminds you of a cozy fall evening, tucked away under a blanket someplace warm, doesn't it? Cocoa is simply pure decadence. The earth is life.

These are names for stick foundations on Anastasia Beverly Hills' website. I chose them because they are the shades for Black girls. Black girl, look at your beauty:

You were so rare and valuable that you were stolen, captured, and enslaved simply to be looked at. You are the Hottentot Venus, the woman the world cannot get enough of.

Your feet stamped out the first rhythms of our nation. First you shuffled around a ring and then danced a jig, and white America leapt at the chance to impersonate you. Your flavor is the very taste of this country.

You have been tried. History tried to break you, bury you, shame you. Yet you sit, like a bitter taste on the tongue, reminding everyone that you are still here and that you deserve your freedom.

Your energy is the strength of a Nation. Your work is the backbone of a People. You are the reason that we survived.

Your very existence is extravagance. You are proof that God delights in beautiful things.

Amber, golden, cinnamon, cocoa, walnut, chestnut, espresso, ebony, truffle, earth.

Black girl, you are the earth. Your body makes us the very ground we stand upon. Trees are rooted in your bones, and they drink from your blood. You are embedded in the very soil, an element.

I walk like my mother. And her mother. And her mother's mother.
I talk like my mother. And her mother. And her mother's mother.
I dance like my mother. And her mother. And her mother's mother.

My mother is the Earth.

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